Lateral

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Review of *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago* by Kemi Adeyemi (Duke University Press)

by Naz Oktay | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Following the movements of Black queer women on queer dance floors in Chicago, Kemi Adeyemi shows how race, feeling, and the geography of the neoliberal city are spatially entangled. Black queer women's moves on the dance floor reveal, navigate, bend, and upset those entanglements that overdetermine their rights to feel, to belong, and to take place in the city. Black queer women do not dance to escape the realities of their everyday lives. Rather, they dance for moments where they can collectively reimagine, redefine, and reclaim their rights to feel good, their rights to take place in the neighborhoods where they are not "supposed to" take place, and ultimately, their rights to the city.

KEYWORDS Black women, Chicago, entanglement, gentrification, neoliberalism, nightlife, queer, urban

Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago. By Kemi Adeyemi. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022, 192 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1869-8. US List $24.95.

In *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago*, Kemi Adeyemi follows the movements of Black queer women on queer dance floors in Chicago. She shows how race, feeling, and the geography of the neoliberal city are spatially entangled, and how Black queer women's moves on the dance floor reveal, navigate, bend, and upset those entanglements that overdetermine their

rights to feel, to belong, and to take place in the city. Adeyemi emphasizes that the queer dance floor is not a space located outside neoliberal governmentalities, but amidst them, as Black queer women keep negotiating pleasure and conflict in these sites. Adeyemi suggests that by engaging in collective practices of taking pleasure, they "articulate their rights to occupy the landscapes of pleasure that the neoliberal city is organized around" and that they "want and deserve access to the sets of feelings that are associated with these spaces" (18). Adeyemi does not define how she is using "entangle(ment)" both as a verb and a noun, yet her notes on her uses of terms like "Black queer women," and "Black," "queer," "women" can be instructive here. She says her use of these terms are not to suggest a fixed understanding of language and/or practice of identity but rather to scrutinize how these terms often structure and organize experiences of people (29). For instance, one of Adeyemi's interlocutors named Taylor talks about the complex relationship they have with the label "Black woman," thay they feel it is "different than being a woman," and even though they feel "woman" is not a category they would like to be attached to themselves, but the world sees them as a Black woman (29). Adeyemi sees Taylor to be in conversation with black feminist theorists, such as Hortense Spillers, Evelyn Hammonds, Saidiya Hartman, who are arguing for "the idea of 'black woman [being] its own gender,'" and for the inextricability of the categories of race and gender that are "mutually constituted through a matrix of violence that continually reinforces 'black woman' as a seemingly stale and unchanging category" (30). So, Adeyemi indicates that the institutions that maintain and reinforce this violence shape the day-to-day experiences of people like Taylor who simultaneously feel constrained by the category "Black woman" but at the same want to honor that shared experience of being (seen as) a Black woman, which is unnameable within the bounds of the dominant "American grammar" in Hortense Spilllers's terms. Given these discussions, whenever Adeyemi emphasizes the spatial entanglements of race, feeling, and the geography of the neoliberal city, the reader might perhaps understand Adeyemi to be gesturing towards a conception of these elements as

mutually constitutive of, inseparable from, inextricable from each other; as if they have been co-constituting each other by binding in knots on knots to the extent that they form one indistinguishable, inseparable, entangled entity.

The book is divided into three chapters, as well as an introduction and conclusion. Each of the main chapters describes and situates the simultaneously affective and spatial negotiations and conflicts that Black queer women move within, through, and against in multiple and complex ways in order to illustrate how they "express the very ability to feel in complex ways, to feel beyond the limited binary of pleasure and terror that has long circumscribed black queer life, as a right in and of itself that they should be afforded" (19). The narrative authority is given to Black queer women themselves theorizing "what happens on and off the dance floors" (27). Each chapter revolves around Adeyemi's ethnographic research on a queer party scene in Chicago: Slo 'Mo, Party Noire, and E N E R G Y. Adeyemi's method of collecting and using the interviews is committed to being in a dynamic dialogue with her subjects. This requires that the ethnographer be accountable and self-reflexive as a participant observer, rather than collecting research participants' words for use as "data" to fit into an academic framework (27). Throughout the book, Black queer women narrate, theorize, and retheorize their own experiences, and "scholarly citations serve primarily as supplements that flesh out black queer women's experiences and add deeper context and complexity" (27). There are no assumptions, demands for, or pretensions of transparency.

In Chapter 1, Kemi Adeyemi situates Slo 'Mo within the neoliberal geography of Chicago. The original venue of the party, the Whistler, is a bar with a capacity of seventy-five people within the hipster gentrification of Logan Square funded by various private development projects. It is in these conditions of rapid development projects that "Slo 'Mo's slowness takes on significance" (43). When the party moved in early 2014 to Slippery Slope, located one block away—a much bigger, less intimate venue—and started to host satellite parties at other venues,

“party regulars felt an acute loss of ownership over the party as the palpability of their Black queer presence was swallowed up in the bar’s largely white, male, and heterosexual clientele” (51). Black queer women “mobilized slowness as a method of critique” on the dance floor, where the music played had gone faster to serve to the tastes and feelings of its new clientele (57). Taking these critiques seriously, organizers moved the party back to the Whistler, noting that “it was a difficult time for attendees and organizers alike” (57). Adeyemi asserts that the embodied experience of being a Black queer woman demands the recognition of the reality that some of the very few opportunities for connecting with other Black queer women “may be done in a neighborhood, in a venue, or through an organization that might not meet all of your needs” (61). Black queer women inhabitate slowness as “moments of presence and pause that comprise strategies of endurance and subsistence, that, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, ‘do not yield easily to the grand narrative of revolution’” (61). This is mostly due to that “the historical, material conditions of existing within bodies marked as Black and as woman and queer demand vigilant attention to the reality of the moment” as your very rare opportunities to connect with other Black queer women may be “in a neighborhood, in a venue, or through an organization that might not meet all of your needs” (61). So, their strategies of remaining at a different, slower pace“articulates ways of knowing and becoming known within the gentrifying landscape that reimagine rights to the city as necessarily negotiated along ephemeral axe” (61). Their strategic slowness, then, is not a move to escape from the violence of whiteness and heterosexuality that organizes the neoliberal city, but to find and make a space, even if in very short moments when everything clicks—*feels right*—in order to imagine their rights to the city, amidst the violence of the gentrifying landscape of Chicago, until someone “fucks it up.”

In Chapter 2, Adeyemi presents the entanglements of Party Noire. She discusses the party’s marketing and branding practices (including the practice of capitalizing Black Joy), Hyde Park’s racialized urban development, the University of Chicago’s impact on it, and discourses around Black neighborhoods in

Chicago. Such discourses render Black neighborhoods as violent and backward, in need of constant police surveillance, places to be poisoned, to be destroyed, places "where you certainly cannot feel good" (86). Amidst these messy entanglements and various scandals tied to Party Noire which happened in 2018, Adeyemi follows "competing accounts of responsibility and accountability" that complicate the various, at times conflicting, employments of Black Joy by the organizers and attendees in a place where "feeling is a deeply racialized and classed commodity that is differentially mapped across distinct territories of the city" (64). For example, in the wake of the 2018 scandals, the attendees demanded accountability and responsibility from the organizers. The organizers emphasized that accountability and responsibility must be shared among organizers and attendees. They then worked to create community support teams as well as various direct communication channels and physical spaces for people needing to take a break from the party for various reasons. More broadly, they worked to foster transformative healing. These efforts towards collective and cooperative joy, Adeyemi suggests, push Black Joy "out of the individuated pleasure that defines the larger neighborhood" and produce alternative modes of ownership of space and community (95). These alternative modes of ownership are developed as a result of cooperative and collective joy work, refusing "the proprietary accumulation of pleasure that defines Hyde Park's racialized urban development," which has, at times, infiltrated Party Noire (95).

Chapter 3 draws on what Adeyemi refers to as the "ordinariness" of the weekly party E N E R G Y to challenge some of the common methodologies of Black, queer, and performance studies. This chapter asks genuine questions that push academics to engage in self-reflexivity in relation to their work and the interests it serves, and in relation to the works they read, including *Feeling Right*. "How Do I Need Black Queer Women to Do My Work? Do I Avoid Black Queer Women in Order to Do My Work? How Do I Need Them to Help Me Think? How Do I Need Them to Be Absent to Help Me Think?" (119) are only a few of these questions. At the end, Adeyemi states that "this chapter was never really *about* E N E R G Y. It is

an attempt at a methodology of the black queer ordinary that is built through practices of description that open us up to speculation through, critically, self-interrogation" (118–19). The gist of the chapter challenges the event-potentiality matrix dominating minoritarian studies, where an "extraordinary" event, understood "as a rupture in time and space," becomes the object of analysis and is used to speculate an otherwise, a more just future (99). This event-potentiality matrix might in turn serve to justify the existence and position of the scholar within the academic institution, as it depends on assigning to and extracting the value from a scholar's ability to make the subjects/objects of analysis transparent and knowable. Against this tendency, Adeyemi experiments with a methodology of Black queer ordinariness which does not pretend to conceive of life as a structured narrative and which does not flatten the complexities of Black queer lives by rendering them transparent and knowable for academic consumption and value making. Instead, this methodology does not assume a position over them as "researcher"/"knower" and instead challenges and questions "the will to know"—the scholar's will to make their subjects/objects transparent, as well as the will of the readers, who may be other scholars, to see them made transparent. This methodology rather seeks to think with and beside them.

Paying close attention to the movements of Black queer women on and off queer dance floors in Chicago, Adeyemi offers a complex and insightful analysis of the spatial territorialization of feelings in the neoliberal city, which is always already entangled with hegemonic systems of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Adeyemi suggests that Black queer women do not dance to escape the realities of their everyday lives. Rather, they dance for moments where they can collectively reimagine, redefine, and reclaim their rights to feel good, their rights to take place in the neighborhoods where they are not "supposed to" take place, and ultimately, their rights to the city. These moments are moments where it *feels right*, when everything vibes together. No matter how ephemeral those moments are—because, as Adeyemi notes, "someone always fucks up the vibe somehow" (x)—they still offer a glimpse at different ways of being with and relating to each other:

different ways of living amidst the mess of neoliberal city. This book will be invaluable to anyone working in feminist studies, queer studies, performance studies, Black studies, and Black geographies. More broadly, it will be useful for those engaged in critical self-reflexive scholarship and ethnography, particularly scholars and students who wish to employ non-extractive and self-accountable methodologies.

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